

American

NEWS & VIEWS

A Weekly Newsletter from Public Affairs, American Embassy

March 1, 2013

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U.S. Shifts Policy on Syria, Announces Direct Support for Rebels

By Phillip Kurata | Staff Writer | 28 February 2013

Washington — The United States has shifted its policy toward Syria by deciding for the first time to send assistance directly to the rebels fighting to topple the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus.

“We need to stand on the side of those in this fight who want to see Syria rise again in unity and see a democracy and human rights and justice,” Secretary of State John Kerry said at an international conference in Rome February 28. “We can’t risk letting this country, in the heart of the Middle East, be destroyed by vicious autocrats or hijacked by the extremists.” Kerry said the assistance will be nonlethal.

The chairman of the Syrian Opposition Council, Moaz al-Khatib, attended the meeting in Rome, along with representatives from 11 other countries, including Egypt, Turkey and countries in Europe and the Gulf. They all support the downfall of the Assad regime and consider the Syrian Opposition Council the legitimate voice of the Syrian people.

Kerry announced that \$60 million in additional U.S. aid will be put directly into the hands of the Syrian opposition leaders to help them strengthen their organizational capacity as well as provide sanitation, food delivery and medical care in areas they control.

Kerry said the Syrian rebels will receive the U.S. aid without delay because part of the money has already been programmed and because members of Congress are ready to allocate more funds to bring about the downfall of Assad.

“Assad cannot shoot his way out of this,” Kerry said.

Kerry said the U.S. contribution to the Syrian rebels is just one part of the assistance package the entire group in Rome is sending to the anti-Assad fighters.

“Different countries are choosing to do different things,” Kerry said. “I am absolutely confident ... that the totality of this effort is going to have an impact on the ability of the Syrian opposition to accomplish its goals.”

Washington has provided \$385 million in humanitarian relief to Syrian refugees and internally displaced people and \$50 million in communication and broadcast equipment to help Syrian rebels communicate with each other and to spread their message throughout the country.

Al-Khatib said the rebel coalition considers the territorial unity of Syria nonnegotiable and will oppose any effort to split the country.

He added: “I am saying here and now, Bashar Assad, you have to behave for once as a human being. Stop killing and massacring this people, arresting and torturing its children. Bashar Assad, you have to adopt at least one wise decision in your life for the future of this country.”

The host of the Rome meeting, Italian Foreign Minister Giulio Terzi, said the international community can no longer allow the Assad regime to continue to massacre Syrians.

“They have to stop violence. They have to release political prisoners, and they have to clearly enable a democratic and pluralist Syria with the exiting of Assad,” Terzi said. “The Syrian people will never be left alone.”

Wildlife in Crisis as Convention Begins

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer | 28 February 2013

Washington — An international conference in Bangkok March 3-14 could determine the future of some of the world’s most majestic animals — elephants, white rhinoceros and polar bears.

The 16th conference of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) will bring together representatives from 177 nations to consider proposals to protect diminishing populations of animals and plants threatened by poaching, harvesting and diminished habitat.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Director Dan Ashe discussed the meeting in a press briefing February 27. Delegates have more to discuss than ever before, Ashe said, because an “extinction crisis” is threatening plants and animals all over the world.

“The agenda has been described as the most ambitious, largest agenda ever proposed before a conference of the parties,” said Ashe, who will head the U.S. delegation in Bangkok. The conference must address the mounting extinction threat and related problems of poaching and illegal trafficking in native life forms.

CITES protections now cover about 5,000 animal species and 29,000 plants, but enforcement is difficult. Wildlife conservation officers frequently have few resources to cover a vast area of wilderness. They face adversaries who are motivated by high black market profits.

Renegade hunters stalk African elephants and slaughter them for their ivory tusks despite an international ban on commercial ivory trade in place under CITES since 1989.

Rhinoceros are hunted for their horns, which some falsely believe to have healthful benefits. A ban on commercial trade in the horn has been in place since 1977.

USFWS anticipates that most attention will focus on protections for elephants, rhino, polar bears and sharks.

Climate change and a resulting loss of their Arctic sea ice habitat are the greatest threat to polar bears. About 400–500 of the cold-weather beasts, or their body parts, enter the commercial marketplace each year, and Ashe says that trade is also a factor in the population's decline.

"We believe that commercial trade in polar bear parts should be ceased," Ashe said. The United States will support listing polar bears on the most restrictive classification of the CITES treaty, Appendix 1. The market price for a polar bear hide has almost doubled in recent years to \$5,000, and stopping that commercial trade would be a key factor in protecting this Arctic animal.

The United States will introduce a proposal to move the oceanic whitetip shark to Appendix 2 of the CITES treaty, a status which gives legal protection to species threatened by commercial trade. Harvest and trade of a species is allowed for life forms classified in this way, but the harvest must be kept to biologically sustainable levels.

Ashe says other nations will be putting forth proposals to protect several other varieties of sharks and manta rays.

The United States is also concerned about the survival of turtles and tortoises, and will join China and Vietnam as sponsors of a proposal to extend protections to 47 different species of turtles.

"These are some of the most endangered class of animals in the world," Ashe said. "About 75 percent of these Asian turtles and tortoises are threatened or endangered." The proposal also marks the first occasion the United States has partnered with China on a conservation measure. Ashe hopes it will form the basis for a new partnership on the issue between the two countries.

China and Vietnam are native habitat for the turtles and tortoises covered by this proposal, so Ashe predicts it does have a good chance for adoption. The United States will present a protection proposal for another variety of turtle that is native to the country. USFWS has been working with state governments to gain support for the proposal, and Ashe has confidence in its adoption.

Burkina Faso and Kenya will propose further restriction on the ivory trade to protect elephant populations. Ashe said the United States has not yet taken a position on that proposal.

Kenya will seek stronger protections for rhino with a proposed prohibition on the export of hunting trophies from the country. Allowing the trophies to leave the country makes a legal source of the horn available on the market.

The United States recently announced the successful arrest of a black market ring dealing in rhino horn. How to empower more effective law enforcement to fight wildlife trafficking is another issue that will be up for discussion in Bangkok. The U.S. Department of State is working with the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime on the establishment of regional law enforcement networks to battle these crimes against nature.

Secretary Kerry Confers in France on Trade, Climate, Mideast, Mali

By Phillip Kurata | Staff Writer | 27 February 2013

Washington — Secretary of State John Kerry and French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius have voiced support for the proposed free-trade agreement between the United States and the European Union.

"The Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership that President Obama just announced is really an exciting opportunity for all of us," Kerry said at a press conference with Fabius in Paris February 27. "It's a moment where fair and free trade can kick into gear economic growth, restore competitiveness, create millions of jobs on both sides of the Atlantic and provide us the strength that we seek and the quality of life for our citizens."

Fabius called the prospect of an agreement an "excellent thing" and said the Europeans will pay close attention to issues such as agriculture, opening of public markets, intellectual property and audiovisual services.

Kerry noted that the European Union is the largest trading partner of the United States, and economic strength on both sides of the Atlantic will help both in facing the challenge of climate change.

"We have a responsibility to leave our children and our grandchildren a healthier planet," Kerry said. He said "smart investments" in energy-efficient technology will create good jobs, new cars, new railways, new houses and new industries.

"The energy marketplace that stares at us as the solution to climate is a \$6 trillion market with 4 to 5 billion users today, and that will grow to 9 [trillion dollars] over the course of the next 40 or so years. This is the future, and it's important for us to grab it," Kerry said.

The secretary expressed U.S. appreciation for French

action in Mali to preserve the country's territorial integrity and stop terrorists from establishing a base in the northern region.

Fabius thanked the United States for its political and logistical support for its operations in Mali, saying, "When France and the United States commit together, they can change things."

With regard to Syria, Kerry and Fabius repeated their support for the Syrian opposition council and coalition and condemned what Kerry called "the Assad regime's criminal behavior."

"We all agree that time has passed for President Assad to heed the voice of his people and the voice of the people in the world who want a peaceful transition and a new opportunity for Syria. That's why we are examining and developing ways to accelerate the political transition that the Syrian people seek and deserve," Kerry said.

With regard to the Iran nuclear issue, Kerry said the talks in Almaty, Kazakhstan, involving Iran on one hand and the United States, Britain, China, France, Russia and Germany on the other were "useful."

"If Iran engages seriously, and we hope they will, then these could pave the way for negotiations that lead towards a longer-term and comprehensive agreement," Kerry said.

The international community has imposed biting sanctions on Iran to pressure the country to comply with its obligations under the nonproliferation treaty.

Kerry said the partnership between the United States and France runs deeper than the day-to-day issues he discussed with Fabius. "This really is a partnership that has withstood the test of time, and there is no doubt that it will continue to serve as the cornerstone of our collective security and our shared prosperity."

Asia Is Boom Region of Future, Officials Say

27 February 2013

Washington — Nations from South and East Asia have experienced some of the world's strongest economic and demographic growth in recent years and will continue to do so in the coming decades of the 21st century. That trend explains why sprawling Asia — from Africa's east coast to the Americas' west coasts — is important to U.S. strategy in foreign affairs.

Top officials from the U.S. State Department and a House of Representatives Foreign Affairs subcommittee discussed a range of issues related to U.S. interests in the region February 26 in a Capitol Hill hearing.

Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Robert Blake said continued expansion of South and East Asia is inevitable.

"Much of the history of the 21st century will be written in this broader Asia-Pacific region, projected to become home to over 5.2 billion people by 2050," Blake said. "That history will have a profound impact on the people and the economy of the United States."

Acting Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Joseph Yun laid out the statistics to the committee: The region is home to more than half of global economic output and more than half the population. Decisions made there will "reverberate far beyond Asia, to Africa, the Middle East and Latin America," Yun said.

For those reasons, the Obama administration has been working for the last four years to "broaden and deepen engagement" in the region, Yun said.

Republican congressman from Ohio Steve Chabot, who chaired the hearing, noted the increasing importance of South Asia and the Indian Ocean in international maritime trade. In view of these trends, he said, the United States must strengthen its efforts to build strong relations with governments of what has now become known as the Indo-Pacific region. He said the U.S. relationship with India, in fact, should be treated as a key element in the nation's broader strategy toward the region.

Blake said recent years have brought increasing military ties.

"India has moved much closer to us on defense cooperation. We now have the largest exercise program with any country in the world with India."

The U.S. military has maintained a presence in East Asia for decades, which has helped to maintain regional stability. Moving forward, Yun said, the United States envisions a region "where freedom of navigation is assured, disagreements are managed cooperatively, and the Korean Peninsula is free from nuclear weapons."

Addressing members of Congress, Yun said, "A peaceful and prosperous Asia-Pacific benefits the peoples of the United States and the region, who can enjoy the jobs and opportunity that come from unhindered shipping and trade and who can raise their children without the specter of conflict."

U.S. relations with China "include an unprecedented number of high-level and people-to-people exchanges and interactions," and U.S. efforts "aim to build a stable, multifaceted bilateral relationship that is grounded in

reality," Yun said

While the United States has developed strong relations with a number of East Asian governments, more doors are now opening with Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands, Yun said.

Steadfast U.S. pressure for greater freedom, democracy and human rights through the region has also stirred movement toward greater openness in Burma, Yun said, allowing "a new chapter in bilateral relations."

Yun said a comprehensive, high-standard trade and investment agreement is now being crafted that will help boost U.S. economic growth and support the creation and retention of high-quality American jobs.

The United States is also working to improve Asian ties diplomatically and economically with participation in regional organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, the Pacific Islands Forum and the Lower Mekong Initiative. On the economic side, Yun said, the Trans-Pacific Partnership is developing a trade and investment agreement that will boost U.S. economic growth.

The United States appointed its first resident ambassador to ASEAN in 2010, Yun said, to assist in developing an organization capable of responding to a wider range of problems, such as "managing disasters, mediating and resolving conflicts, mitigating pandemic threats, combating illicit trafficking of persons and goods, and other transnational security concerns."

U.S. Central Bank Will Keep Interest Rates Low

By Stephen Kaufman | Staff Writer | 27 February 2013

Washington — Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke told U.S. lawmakers that the U.S. central bank plans to continue its current quantitative easing program of purchasing \$85 billion worth of U.S. mortgage and Treasury bonds per month to help spur U.S. economic recovery by keeping interest rates low to encourage businesses to expand and hire more workers.

The Fed chairman testified before the Senate Banking Committee February 26 and the House Financial Services Committee February 27 to convey the central bank's semiannual report on monetary policy.

Bernanke told U.S. senators that over the past year, the U.S. gross domestic product has risen moderately but unevenly, partly because of the effects of a severe storm that crippled the eastern United States in late October 2012. But he said economic growth appears to have

picked up in the beginning of 2013, and inflation will likely remain low in the medium term at less than 2 percent.

In response to the 2007–2009 financial crisis and recession, the Fed cut the official interest rate it pays to banks to effectively zero percent, and has purchased more than \$2.5 trillion in mortgage and Treasury debt. The Fed plans to continue purchasing \$40 billion in mortgage-backed securities and \$45 billion in Treasury securities each month until the U.S. unemployment rate, currently at 7.9 percent, improves to 6.5 percent.

"Keeping longer-term interest rates low has helped spark recovery in the housing market and led to increased sales and production of automobiles and other durable goods. By raising employment and household wealth — for example, through higher home prices — these developments have in turn supported consumer sentiment and spending," he said.

Should the Fed's quantitative easing program provoke inflation fears, "the committee remains confident that it has the tools necessary to tighten monetary policy when the time comes to do so," he said.

The U.S. economy is a crucial engine for growth in the global economy, and movements in its gross domestic product, international trade levels, employment and monetary policy are closely monitored by world governments and international financial markets. World currency markets also monitor U.S. economic activity because the U.S. dollar acts as the reserve global currency that underpins the 24-hour-a-day foreign exchange market that links to the flow of global investments.

Bernanke told the Senate Banking Committee that U.S. monetary policies in response to the economic downturn are being replicated by other industrial countries, and together they are "increasing demand globally and helping not only our businesses but also the businesses in other countries that export to us."

The Fed's policies have the twin domestic-based goals of increasing employment and ensuring price stability, but they also benefit U.S. trading partners, he said.

"If all the major economies that need support provide stimulus and extra aggregate demand, that's mutually beneficial because, for example, China depends on the strength of Europe and the U.S. as their export market, and we too depend on other countries as well as a market for our goods. So this is, I think, a positive-sum game, not a zero-sum game," Bernanke said.

In December 2012, the Federal Open Market Committee, the policymaking arm of the Federal Reserve, shifted its

planning strategy from using calendar dates to indicate how long it expects economic conditions to support very low interest rates. It decided to instead leave its current policy in place for as long as the U.S. unemployment rate is above 6.5 percent and inflation is projected to be no more than 2.5 percent.

"An advantage of the new formulation, relative to the previous date-based guidance, is that it allows market participants and the public to update their monetary policy expectations more accurately in response to new information about the economic outlook," Bernanke said.

In his testimony to the House Financial Services Committee, the Fed chair said he does not expect U.S. unemployment to reach 6 percent until around 2016.

He also said there is no sign that the U.S. dollar is losing its status as the world's reserve currency, noting that the amount of global reserves held in dollars is "growing, not shrinking," and that the "reserve currency status at least for the foreseeable future is very much intact."

In his testimony to both committees, Bernanke warned that automatic Federal spending cuts known as sequestration, which are due to go into effect March 1, will be "a drag on near-term economic recovery."

He told the Senate Banking Committee that the Congressional Budget Office has estimated that the cuts will cost about six-tenths of 1 percent of economic growth in 2013, and the equivalent of about 750,000 jobs.

"I think an appropriate balance would be to introduce these cuts more gradually and to compensate with larger and more sustained cuts in the longer run to address our long-run fiscal issues," he said, adding that the uncertainties over the Federal budget and the willingness of Congress to raise the U.S. debt ceiling are "also costly in terms of the ability of the private sector to plan to take risks and to help grow the economy."

Trans-Atlantic Trade Deal a "Unique Opportunity" for U.S., EU

26 February 2013

Washington — Secretary of State John Kerry said the U.S. relationship with Germany is one of its "most vibrant" global alliances, and that a proposed trans-Atlantic trade deal with the European Union would help to lift the economies of both participants, as well as raise global trading standards.

Speaking with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin February 26, Kerry said he looked forward to discussing with her the proposed Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership between the United States

and the EU, which would strengthen what is already the world's largest economic relationship as they continue to recover from years of recession.

"President Obama believes there is a really unique opportunity looking at us now," Kerry said. "We think this is something that can help lift the economy of Europe, strengthen our economy, create jobs for Americans, for Germans, for all Europeans, and create one of the largest allied markets in the world."

Economic ties between the United States and the EU account for half of the world's economic output and nearly \$1 trillion, or one-third, of the global trade in goods and services.

The proposed partnership would advance trade and investment liberalization and address regulatory and other nontariff barriers. It could also influence global trade by developing rules and principles on issues concerning state-owned enterprises and promoting the global competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises.

"It will help raise standards, it will help break down barriers, and we believe it is good for all of us," Kerry said.

In a February 26 town hall meeting with German youth, Kerry emphasized that the U.S. and European economic futures are tied, and that challenges to European economies are felt in the United States.

"You're our biggest trading partner, and there are lots of investments from Europe in the United States and vice versa, and we buy from you and vice versa," he said. By working together, he added, "we have huge opportunity to create jobs, to build a stronger economy, and to build a future for each other."

In his remarks after meeting with German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, Kerry said that among EU countries, Germany is the largest U.S. trading partner.

"We want to see even more trade and investment that will create jobs — jobs for Germans, jobs for Americans, jobs for all Europeans — and help to lift the European economy at a time that it obviously needs it," he said.

Talks to create the free-trade alliance are scheduled to begin by the end of June. Kerry said the agreement is a priority for Obama, and he pledged to work "diligently" to try to advance it.

The secretary said the United States stood with Germany throughout the Cold War of the 20th century and both countries have worked together over the years to meet

“an extraordinary number of challenges” across Europe and around the world.

“Germany is without doubt one of our strongest and most effective allies in the world, and we are very, very grateful for your leadership, the leadership of your government, and the sustaining friendship and support of your people, because it has made a difference,” Kerry said.

U.S. Allows More American Economic Activity in Burma

25 February 2013

Washington — The U.S. Department of the Treasury February 22 issued a general license to authorize more U.S. economic activity in Burma.

The license, issued by the Office of Foreign Assets Control, allows individuals, companies and financial institutions to conduct most transactions — including opening and maintaining accounts and conducting a range of other financial services — with four of Burma’s major financial entities: Myanma Economic Bank, Myanma Investment and Commercial Bank, Asia Green Development Bank and Ayeyarwady Bank.

The action will give U.S. companies and nongovernmental organizations greater access to some of the largest Burmese banks and allow these financial entities to access the U.S. financial system. It supports the July 2012 easing of U.S. economic sanctions on Burma that authorized new investment in Burma by U.S. persons and encouraged additional U.S. economic involvement in Burma.

“Increased access to Burma’s banking system for our companies and nongovernmental organizations will help to facilitate Burma’s continued social and economic development, serve as a model for responsible investment and help to provide a better future for the Burmese people,” said Treasury Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David S. Cohen in a February 22 Treasury Department news release.

“The United States is committed to supporting positive political and economic reforms in Burma,” the release said, “and we urge the Burmese government to continue this progress by implementing measures that increase socio-economic development, promote government transparency and accountability, protect human rights and religious freedom, release remaining political prisoners and advance ethnic reconciliation across the country.”

In May 2012, President Obama nominated the first U.S. ambassador to Burma in 22 years and announced an easing of financial sanctions on the country in response to

what he called its “significant progress along the path to democracy.”

“Today marks the beginning of a new chapter in the relationship between the United States and Burma,” Obama said in a May 17 statement. He said the United States is living up to its pledge to “respond to positive developments in Burma and to clearly demonstrate America’s commitment to the future of an extraordinary country, a courageous people and universal values.”

President Obama, Prime Minister Abe Discuss Security, Economic Issues

By Jane Morse | Staff Writer | 22 February 2013

Washington — President Obama and Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe met at the White House February 22 to discuss security and economic issues.

During a short press briefing after their meeting in the Oval Office, Obama told reporters that the two leaders had “close consultations on a wide range of security issues, in particular our concerns about the provocative actions that have been taken in North Korea and our determination to take strong actions in response.”

North Korea launched a rocket December 11 that was successful in advancing its missile program. The White House immediately issued a statement calling the launch “a highly provocative act” that threatened regional security, violated several U.N. Security Council resolutions, contravened North Korea’s international obligations and undermined the global nonproliferation regime.

Abe, speaking through an interpreter at the February 22 press briefing, said: “We just cannot tolerate the actions of North Korea, such as launching missiles and conducting nuclear tests. So we agreed that we would cooperate with each other in dealing resolutely with North Korea.”

In response to questions, Abe said he and the president agreed “that it was important for Japan and the United States to not provide rewards to North Korea for their actions, such as launching missiles and conducting nuclear tests.” He added: “We agreed that we would cooperate so that a resolution, including sanctions, would be adopted in the U.N. We also discussed additional sanctions; for example, financial sanctions. And we agreed to continue cooperating in that regard as well.”

Acknowledging that the security environment in the Asia-Pacific region is becoming “more and more difficult,” Abe said: “We need to create an order in this region, based on cooperation between our two countries, to secure the freedom of the seas and to secure a region which is governed based on laws, not on force.”

Obama said he and the prime minister would continue their talks later that day, this time to discuss economic cooperation between the two countries.

"I know that Prime Minister Abe and I both agree," Obama said, "that our Number 1 priority has to be making sure that we are increasing growth and making sure that people have the opportunity to prosper if they're willing to work hard, in both our countries."

Trade investment in Japan currently supports 1 million jobs in the United States, according to U.S. officials.

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